NEWS

Middlesex Fells disposal stations aim to reduce pet waste bags

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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One of the dog waste disposal stations in the Middlesex Fells Reservation. This station is located near the entrance to Bellvue Pond in Medford. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

What's one of the biggest problems facing the Middlesex Fells Re

Believe it or not, dog poop bags.

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That's right. The problem has proliferated the state's recreation areas as more and more residents enjoy the great outdoors with their pets and in instances they pick up after their dogs, many don't carry the bags out of the parks with them.

"People really love taking their dogs there," said Friends of the Fells Executive Director Chris Redfern. "They just don't really love taking the bags back out in their cars."

The pet waste station at Bellvue Pond in Medford. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

To that end, the Friends of the Fells, working with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), have started a pilot program that provides two pet waste stations for disposal of poop bags.

A station at Greenwood Park in Stoneham was installed in May o followed by second one at Bellvue Pond in Medford in July.

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The barrels cost $600 each and were provided by DoodyCalls, a pet waste management company which has contracted with the Friends to pick up waste from the 9-gallon drums once a week.

Redfern said the cost is $20 per station per pickup, or $40 a week.

“It adds up,” Redfern said. “It’s about $2,400 a year.”

The pet waste station at Greenwood Park in Stoneham. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

So far, Redfern said the Friends have seen a “significant reduction” in the number of bags left alongside the trails.

“It’s going really well,” he said. “And it’s exciting because this is such an intense frustration for so many visitors, but I feel hopeful. If this h visitors do the right thing with their dog’s doodoo, and it seems t

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then we will need to find some sort of continual source of support, if the DCR agrees."

Redfern said the Friends will probably have to ask for donations or sponsorships from individuals or businesses to keep the stations going or even expand. Anyone interested, he said, should reach out to the organization.

Be Kind! campaign

The Friends of the Fells have been dealing with dog issues in the park for many years.

"We've spoken to a number of people about this issue and pet waste is, if not one of, it's the top concern they have when enjoying the space," Redfern said.

That led the Friends to work with the DCR to start the Be Kind! awareness campaign, which urges park users to act with kindness not only towards one another, but the animals and plants living in the environment.

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Be Kind! campaign signs are all over the Middlesex Fells Reservation, making visitors aware of some simple rules they can follow while at the park. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Redfern said the signs remind people to follow some simple rules so everyone can enjoy the space safely. And that means leashing dogs on trails, picking up their waste and removing it from the Fells.

“It’s about keeping the space as you found it,” he said. “It’s sharing the trails with bikers, hikers, people with small children and people with dogs.”

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While all those people might also leave litter behind, Redfern said the waste bags are a huge problem.

“Yes, there’s definitely a trash problem, but when you look at the volume, the pet waste is up there,” he said. “People actually leave

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of them at the trail heads! We've even found poop bags hanging from tree branches because people fling them into the park."

A look at a pile of dog waste bags found in the Middlesex Fells Reservation by volunteers. COURTESY PHOTO/CHRIS REDFERN

And the DCR, he added, just doesn't have the capacity to clean them up. But there are many people who pick them up.

"We do have some lovely volunteers who are out there picking up other people's poop," Redfern said. "There are a lot of poop fairies, but
enough."

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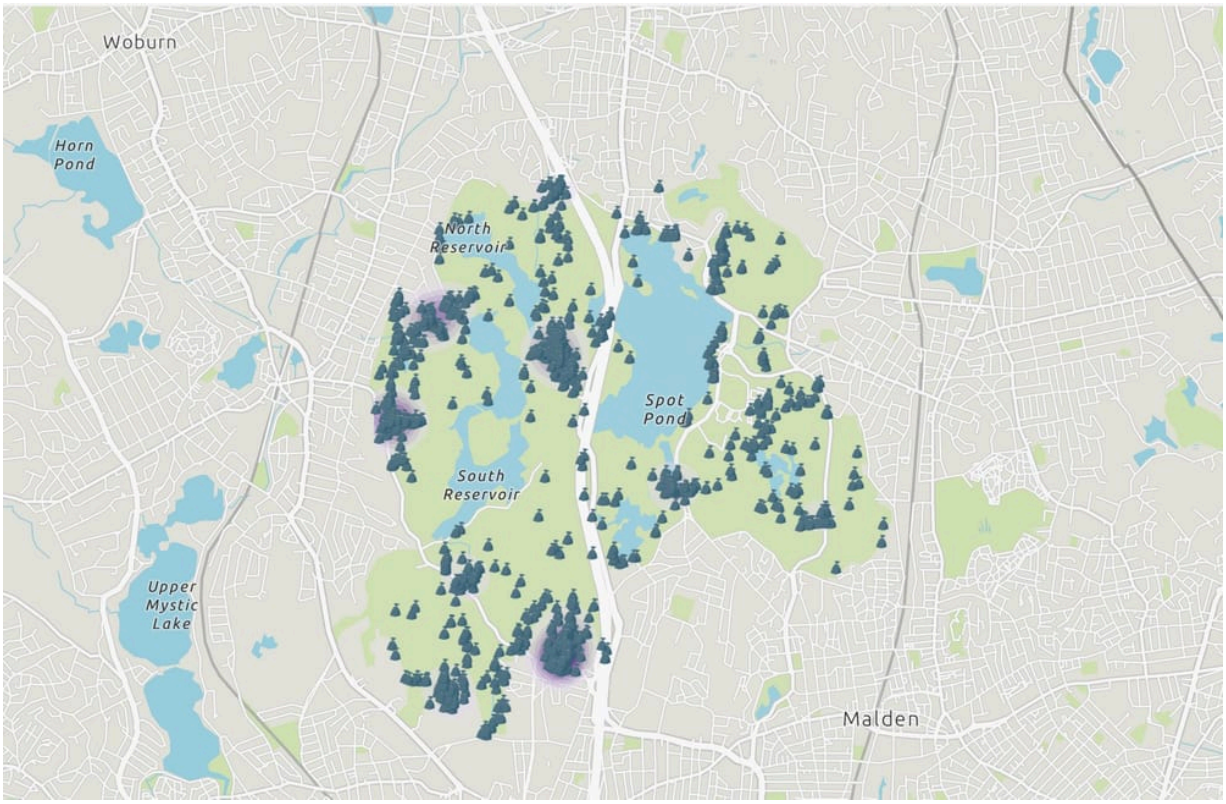
Then what can be done? Redfern said the Be Kind! campaign helps raise awareness and the new stations provide a place to drop the bags.

But there's also a data component in helping to figure out the higher problem areas. Over the past several years, the Friends have been working with Earthwise Aware, a volunteer organization that tracks all sorts of data in the Fells, including dog poop.

"The data has been very useful in helping us understand the problem," Redfern said. "We can also see progress over time."



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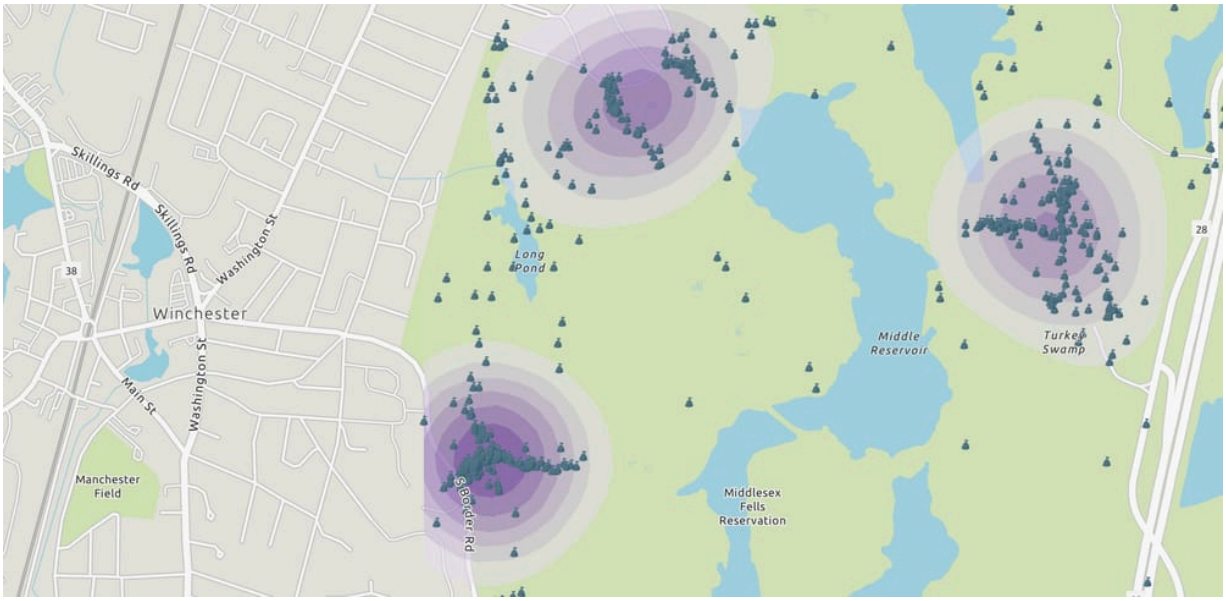

A look at the areas where dog poop bags have been spotted in the Middlesex Fells. The purple areas denote higher concentrations. COURTESY PHOTOS/EARTHWISE AWARE

Redfern said volunteers on the trails record any bags they find, taking a photo and uploading it to the Earthwise site. That's how the Friends decided where to place the two stations.

"We found that Bellvue Pond and Greenwood Park are more popular areas of the park," Redfern said. "There are more than 50 entrances into the Fells so there are many ways in and out. I think those sites are popular because they have parking lots."

What about the Sheepfold Meadow? It's the only allowed area of the Fells where dog owners can have their pets off leash.

"Oh, the Sheepfold is a huge problem area for us because of the concentration of dogs," Redfern said. "But, the DCR has a Dumpster there and people throw their bags in there."

Redfern said the Friends plan to put together a report about the dog waste, hopefully by the end of the year.

"Because the data is being collected on a poop map, we have the data for those two areas," he said. "And since the collection has been going

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on, we now have the after data."

DCR and Friends of the Fells staff at the placement of the pet waste station at Glenwood Park in Stoneham. COURTESY PHOTO/FRIENDS OF THE FELLS

What's the big deal?

Some people may wonder why all the fuss over dog poop and waste bags. Can't the dogs just poop in the woods without it being removed?

The answer is no.

"Dogs create a kind of waste that's a biopollution," said Redfern. "Dogs carry diseases that can make other dogs and people sick."

Dog feces can also change the environment around it.

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"Dog waste is high in nutrients from a dog's diet," according to Mass.gov's DCR website. "This can alter the soil and water chemistry, impacting native plant communities. Dog waste can present safety issues when another dog encounters it. Diseases can spread to both pets and wildlife through dog waste, and can harm our water supply."

A sign at Bellvue Pond telling visitors to pick up after their dogs. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTOS/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Redfern said all the issues surrounding dogs is really why the Friends, Earthwise and the DCR are working together to find solutions. The two stations are obviously helping, he added, but any further expansion across the park's 2,200 acres will have to have approval from the state.

"The DCR will have to tell us if the pilot is expanding or ending," Redfern said. "But we have a good relationship with the people there who want to help care for the park. Any expansion will be done with their blessing."

Nell Escobar Coakley has been a journalist for more than 30 years. She is co-founder and editor-in-chief of Gotta Know Medford and editor of Winchester News. She can be reached at editor@winchesternews.org.

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